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ABSTRACT

This review of the literature on aggression and violence in girls, especially girls in Canada, begins with data showing increasing rates of assault and other violent crimes by Canadian girls, although the rate for girls continues to be much less than for boys (a fact possibly responsible for the small amount of research on this population). The paper then provides definitions of "aggression," "violence," "bullying," and "conduct disorder". Discussion then addresses why girls engage in aggression and violence, family dynamics and parental relationships, school difficulties, mental health issues and personality factors, problematic cognitive and social factors, negative self-representation, atypical physiological responses, drug involvement, connections to non-prosocial peers, adolescents' urge to rebel, gender issues, alleviating boredom, and attention-seeking. Five characteristics more common in violent girls than either non-violent girls or both violent and non-violent boys are identified, including having been attacked while going to or from school and sexual abuse. A table compares myths and realities about violent girls. The final section addresses prevention and offers guidelines on working with girls, working with boys, working with parents, and working with schools and communities. (Contains approximately 100 references.) (DB)

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UNDERSTANDING AGGRESSIVE GIRLS IN CANADA: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Introduction

This literature review was conducted to provide the groundwork for the creation of a six page "fact sheet" on aggressive girls for the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence. Our review of the literature includes a review of previous major literature reviews focusing on girls and aggression and violence (Berger, 1989; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1992, 1998; Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunschot, Cunningham & Saunders, 2000) as well as additional searches using the data bases PsychINFO, Sociological Abstracts, and ERIC using keywords such as aggression, violence, girls, adolescents, female adolescents, children and youth. Also consulted were well-known researchers in the field of girls' aggression and violence, who provided access to current work and suggested the inclusion of the work of still other researchers. In all, more than fifty publications that focus particularly on girls are included; many, but not all of these, provide a Canadian perspective. As Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunschot, Cunningham and Saunders (2000) point out, currently few studies focus exclusively on girls, fewer still have been conducted in Canada. More research and evaluation of programs are needed. The need for this literature search and for a fact sheet that helps the public to understand girls who are aggressive and violent is examined below.

Is there cause for alarm?

In recent years in Canada, the use of aggression and violence by girls has received much attention. Since the November 1997 beating in Victoria, BC, of fourteen year old Reena Verk by seven teenage girls and one teenage boy, and her subsequent murder by one of the girls and the boy, the rise in girls' involvement in violence has been extensively reported and studied. Artz, (1998) noted an increase of 190% from 1986 to 1993 in the number of female youth charged with assault in Canada. DeKeseredy (2000), who studied the time

period 1992 and 1996, reported an 18% increase in the number of Canadian girls charged with assault during that short time. Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunschot, Cunningham and Saunders (2000, p. 4) in their extensive literature review on female adolescent aggression also examined this question, and noted that, "Violence with adolescent girls *is the only area consistently showing an increase in reported rates of violent offending* (considering both age and gender) in Canada" (StatsCan, 1999). They amplify this point by offering the following quote from a StatsCan document:

> Over the past decade, the violent crime rate for female youths has increased twice as much as for male youths. In 1998, the rate for male youths charged with violent crime decreased slightly (-0.9%) while that for femal youths remained unchanged" (The Daily, Statistics Canada, July 21, 1999; in Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunschot, Cunningham & Saunders , 2000, p. 4).

The Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics (1999) and the Police Services Division of the British Columbia Ministry of the Attorney General reported (BC Crime Trends, 1998) that the violent crime rate for both male and female youth increased steadily during the late nineteen eighties and mid-nineteen nineties. For male youth the rate rose from a level of 8.5 per 1000 in 1988 to a peak in 1994 at 16.2 per 1000 and began in 1995, to decline. The rate for females rose from a level of 2.2 per 1000 in 1988 to a peak in 1996 of 5.6 per 1000, remained at approximately 5.3 per 1000 over the next two years and began to decline only in 1999 (BC Crime Trends, 1998). This suggests that overall, during that time period, the rate for male youth came close to doubling, while the rate for female youth came close to tripling.

Since 1998 however, (the last figures reported by Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunschot, Cunningham & Saunders, 2000), in a document entitled *Criminal Justice*

Indicators Graphical Overview, 1999 produced by the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics three key points are made with respect to gender and youth participation in violent crime:

- The violent crime rate for male youth began to decrease in 1995, with this trend continuing to 1999.
- In 1999, the violent crime rate dropped for both male youth (-5%) and for female youths (-6%), compared to 1998.
- In 1999, three quarters of violent offenses were committed by males.

Thus while females may indeed have been involving themselves in violent crime to a greater degree than ever before between 1988 and 1998, this trend appears to be shifting. Further, even at its height, at least in so far as official charge rates are concerned, female youth participation in violent crime has always been and still is substantially lower than that of male youth.

The well-documented nineteen eighties and nineties' numerical rise in participation in violence by female youth (and for that matter male youth) has everywhere been greeted with alarm (c.f. Gabor; 1999). It must be noted however, that the literature that focuses on youth crime rates and singles out girls' participation in violent crime for special attention stresses two key points with respect to girls: 1) Despite statistically significant and steep increases in the number of charges laid against girls, the number of charges laid against boys is still three to four times greater. 2) The overall increase in girls' participation in violent crime is somewhat misleading, especially when the increase in percent of charge rates is used as the benchmark, because of the overall low numbers of girls who are charged, such that a small increase in charges results in a large increase in percent (BC Crime Trends, 1998). As well, some researchers suggest that great caution must be exercised when interpreting the numbers

even beyond the provisos already mentioned. DeKeseredy (2000) for example, warns against an over-interpretation of the numbers because the recorded increase can be partially attributed to a more punitive approach towards schoolyard fights and bullying and to the move by police and parents to reframe as "assault" behaviors previously viewed by police and parents as "incorrigibility." Reitsma-Street (1999) in her comparison of criminal code charges brought against girls in Canadian youth courts notes that,

> although the overall numbers of charges laid has increased, the absolute numbers for *serious* charges like murder, arson, break and enter, fraud, robbery, major theft and trafficking or possession of drugs are low and have remained constant (p. 342).

This suggests a cautious approach towards the use of official charge rates as indicators of a rise in adolescent females' participation in violence.

It should also be noted that official charge rates are not the only sources of information about girls' (or for that matter boys') participation in violence. Researchers in the area of youth violence have over the years, conducted self-report surveys in order to create a more accurate picture of the use of violence by young people. These surveys consistently show a higher involvement in aggressive behavior for both males and females than that recorded by official charge rates. Further, these surveys also show a smaller gap between female and male participation in violence than that recorded in official charge rates. During the nineteen seventies and eighties, the ratio for male to female participation in violent crimes such as aggravated assault was on the order of 5:1 in the United States (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1980) and in Canada, for assault, on the order of 4:1 (BC Crime Trends, 1998). Current male-female comparisons for youth suggest a convergence of official charge rates for violent crime and for self-reported rates of participation in violence, with

both reflecting a male-female ratio of approximately 3:1 (Chesney-Lind & Okamoto, 2000, BC Crime Trends, 1998). Artz and Riecken (1994) in their British Columbia study of violent school girls, reported that 20.9% of 703 adolescent girls surveyed and 51.9%763 adolescent boys surveyed reported having "beaten up and other kid" at least once or twice in the year in which the survey was conducted. This suggests a ratio of 2.5:1 for males over females and supports the notion that the gender gap is growing smaller. However, a 1999 repetition of the survey reported in Artz and Riecken (1994) showed that in the schools under study, self-reported violence among young people had declined significantly with 38.9% of adolescent males (n = 183) and only 10.4% of adolescent females (n = 155) reporting having "beaten up and other kid" at least once or twice in the year in which the second survey was conducted (Artz, Riecken, MacIntyre, Lam & Maczweski, 1999). These latest figures, as well as reflecting an overall reduction in the use of violence, also reflect a return to a widening of the gender gap to a ratio of 3.9:1 for males over females.

It appears that at the present time at least, a decline in the use of violence by adolescents is being recorded both through official crime rates and through self reports. As well, it appears that female adolescents' use of violence, even at its peak, has always been significantly lower than that of male adolescents. We are not now and have never been living through a time in which female adolescents ought to be regarded as a new source of threat to society. The numbers show that the vast majority of adolescent girls do not in fact engage in violence, at least not the kind of violence that leads to their being charged with a criminal offense. This is, in part, why adolescent girls have for many decades been ignored by those who study violence and aggression and why violence and aggression have for so long been regarded as male forms of behavior (Blum, 1997).

The practice of ignoring adolescent girls in this way has come at a cost: When we do encounter girls who use violence we are still largely at a loss with regard to understanding their motivations and practices. We rely upon male-focused and male-derived explanations for their behavior; we are also unsure about how best to intervene and about how we might prevent their engagement in violence in the first place (Artz, 1998; Baines & Alder, 1996; Chesney-Lind, 1999; Corrado, Cohen & Ogders, 1998). Adolescent females use violence differently than adolescent males do and resort to violence for different reasons (Artz, Riecken, MacIntyre, Lam & Maczewski, 2000; Cameron, 2000). Typically, girls use indirect aggression, sometimes termed relational aggression, to a greater degree than boys do (Peplar & Sedighdeilami; 1998; Tremblay, 2000). Owens (1996; 1997) and Russell and Owens (1999) have found that for children between 7 to 17 years of age, their choices regarding the use of direct or indirect aggression depends to some degree on the sex of their targets. Girls appear to use more direct aggression against boys and more indirect aggression against girls. Also typically, girls who use overt physical violence have until quite recently been regarded as aberrant, that is, not feminine (Chesney-Lind and Shelden, 1998). Thus, girls' aggressive behaviors have not always been recognized as such and theories that might support effective prevention and intervention have never kept pace with the need for well-founded approaches. The issue is more than merely one of numbers, it is also one that requires an in-depth understanding of the dynamics involved in girls' participation in violence. We begin by first of all defining the terms used to discuss girls' participation in aggression and violence.

Terms and definitions

Aggression

Aggression is defined in New Webster (1984) as "the first attack or act of hostility" (p. 18). Cavell (2000) defines aggression as "a class of behaviors that have in common an intrusive, demanding, and aversive effect on others" (p. 8). Because it is difficult to ascertain intent, Cavell emphasizes the impact and not the intent of behavior in his definition. He notes also that aggression can take various forms, either overt (verbal and physical aggression) or covert (lying, stealing, truancy). Aggression can be direct or indirect. Indirect aggression is also referred to as "social" or "relational" aggression and includes: shunning or excluding someone from a group, becoming friends with others as a form of retaliation or revenge, ignoring another person, gossiping, telling negative tales or spreading false stories, revealing another person's secrets, and the like. Direct verbal aggression encompasses threatening others, yelling, insulting, name-calling, teasing, purposefully disturbing others (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Moretti, Holland, & McKay, 2001). Direct physical aggression includes hitting, shoving, kicking, tripping, pushing, pulling and all aspects of injury to another's body and extends to deliberate destruction of property. again, the focus of these definitions is ultimately on the impact of the behaviors (Cavell, 2000; Owens, 1996).

Violence

Violence is defined in New Webster (1984) as "injury done to anything which is entitled to respect or reverence; unjust use of force; attack; assault" (p. 937). Artz (1998) defined as violent the act of "beating up another kid" and used this to identify those deemed as violent or "hitting" girls through self-report surveys. With this as her starting point, she compared girls who "hit" to boys who "hit" and to girls and boys who do not "hit," and created a statistically based profile of the violent school girl (see the section on *Who is the Violent Girl?* on page 22 or this paper). Corrado, Cohen and Ogders (1998) in their chapter

on teen violence in *Teen Violence: A global perspective,* (Summers & Hoffan, Eds.), define violence in terms of Canada's criminal code. Thus common assault, assault with a weapon, aggravated assault, sexual assault and homicide are seen as violent behaviors. Both Artz and Corrado et al. distinguish between aggression and violence and designate as violent those acts that involve physical force. This distinction may in the end be problematic because such a focus on overt, observable, physical aggression can, as Peplar and Craig (1999) point out, contribute to the under representation of girls in the literature on aggression. This under representation appears to have its origins in what Bjorkqvist and Niemela, (1992) and Bjorkqvist, Osterman and Kaukianen, (1992) identify as the male bias to interpret violence as direct and physical while ignoring indirect aggression that is also violent especially when it is used to manipulate others into attacking or otherwise harming a victim. Making clear the distinction between aggression and violence is complicated by the fact that most studies to date do not clearly define the terms nor do they involve focused measurement of aggressive and violent behaviour (Moretti & Odgers, in press).

Bullying[1]

Craig, Peters and Konarski (1998, p. 1) define bullying as "an interaction in which a dominant individual (the bully) repeatedly exhibits aggressive behavior intended to cause distress to a less dominant individual (the victim)." Bullies gain power over their victims through a variety of means: physical strength, status within the peer group, knowing another

[1] The term bullying, like the terms aggression and violence, also suffers from interpretative difficulties. Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary (1991) provides the following definitions: 1. *archaic* a: SWEETHEART b: a fine chap 2. a: a blustering browbeating fellow; *esp.* : one habitually cruel to others weaker than himself; b: the protector of a prostitute: PIMP...(p. 187). The cruel abuse of power inherent in bullying is sometimes masked by the less threatening interpretations also attributed to the term -- protector or blusterer, fine fellow etc. Especially confusing is the notion that a bully also protects those who adhere to him or her, as does a pimp. Bullies attract followings largely because they offer a sense of security however false, even to those they exploit so long as the followers remain loyal and under the bully's control.

child's weaknesses, or recruiting the support of other children (Connolly, Pepler, Craig, & Taradash, 2000).

Bullying is prevalent in Canadian schools and schools in other countries (Pepler & Connolly, 2000). It occurs with similar frequency among school-aged children in Canada, Australia, Scandinavia and England (Connolly, Pepler, Craig, & Taradash, 2000). Craig and Pepler (1997) report that bullying occurs once every 7 minutes on school playgrounds and once every 25 minutes in classrooms. In a longitudinal study, 9% of Canadian girls between the ages of four and 11 reported participating in bullying other children while 7% reported being victimized by bullies (Craig, Peters & Konarski, 1998). In observations of schoo' playground interactions, Pepler and Sedighdeilami (1998) found that 68% of children observed were observed in both the role of bully and the role of victim. Further, although as children get older, the prevalence of bullying decreases, the severity of bullying does not decrease; so for example, in adolescence, it often takes other forms of abusive behavior, such as sexual harassment (Connolly, Pepler, Craig, & Taradash (2000).

While much has been written about bullies and bullying in general, less has been written about girl bullies (Pepler & Connolly, 2000). Thus far, research shows that girl bullies tend to use indirect or relational aggression to manipulate social groups through the use of name-calling, verbal abuse, gossip and rumor, and social exclusion and shunning (Craig & Pepler, 1997). Jones (1998), in a study of 12 to 18 year-old girls' school students found evidence of bullying through exclusion and harassment in chat rooms and via email. Merten (1997) in his article, *The Meaning of Meanness: Popularity, Competition and Conflict Among Junior High School Girls*, notes the strong connection between girls' meanness to other girls, even those they point to as their closest friends, and their competition for male

attention. Merten echoes Crick's and Grotpeter's (1996) finding that girls use relational aggression to secure a favorable social position: "competition-conflict to gain or preserve popularity was an ever-present undercurrent in the interpersonal relationships [of the girls who participated in their study]" (p.185). Richard Tremblay (2000) in his recent article, *The Origins of Youth Violence*, provides compelling evidence from Canada's National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) based on a random sampling of 16,038 Canadian children aged four to eleven years that "girls have higher levels of indirect aggression at every age, and that indirect aggression increases with age for both boys and girls" (p. 20). Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunschot, Cunningham & Saunders, 2000, citing Crick and Dodge (1994), note that boys seem to be more consistently instrumental, that is more physically and outwardly oriented and focused on power and control directed at external events, while girls consistently appear to be more interpersonally oriented and focused on controlling relationships. An understanding of girl bullies must therefore, include an understanding of indirect aggression, competition, and cruelty as it is used by girls.

Conduct disorder

On occasion, girls who are known to be frequently involved in the use of aggression and violence are diagnosed "conduct disordered." Conduct disorder is a Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (DSM) category. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder Fourth Edition* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), a conduct disorder is "a repetitive and persistent pattern of behavior in which the basic rights of others or major age-appropriate societal norms or rules are violated (p. 85)." Two types of conduct disorder are identified: childhood onset type and adolescent onset. Locating frequent and patterned use of aggression and violence within the scope of the DSM, labels

such behavior as a mental health issue. Indeed, Leschied, Cummings,Van Brunschot, Cunningham & Saunders, (2000) point out that five studies conducted between 1991 and 1998 (Curtis, 1991; Zoccolillo & Rogers, 1991; Paikoff, Brooks-Gun & Warren, 1991; Ellickson, Saner, & McGuigan, 1997; Jasper, Smith & Bailey, 1998) demonstrated a connection between aggression and conduct disorder[2] and other mental health issues such as depression, self-harm, fire-setting and other unspecified signs of mental illness. Girls deemed to be conduct disordered display a repetitive pattern of behaviors that involve violating social norms or the rights of others (Health Central). It is the *pattern* of their behaviors that distinguishes them from non-conduct disordered girls. Highly aggressive girls will typically meet DSM criteria for a diagnosis of conduct disorder if they have committed at least 3 violations on 4 categories of aggression (to people and animals, to property, deceit/theft, serious violations of rules) in the past 12 months, with one being within the past 6 months (Cavell, 2000).

Attaching a mental disorder diagnosis to girls who act aggressively emphasizes the seriousness of the issue of aggression and prompts us to ask how girls become conduct disordered. Biological, genetic and medical factors appear to be related to the occurrence of conduct disorder with some children (Connor, 2000). Environmental factors, such as family, education, and peer relationships influence the development and maintenance of conduct disorder. While conduct disorders are frequently confused with oppositional disorders, conduct disorders reflect a more troubling pattern of behavior. For example, girls with behaviours characterized as oppositional disorders display patterns of negativistic, hostile and defiant behavior, but unlike conduct disordered girls, their behavior does not involve

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[2] 90% of "aggressive" girls fit the profile for conduct disorder (Zoccolillo & Rogers, 1991).

violating the rights of others. However, a diagnosis of oppositional defiance disorder is often a precursor to a conduct disorder diagnosis (Cavell, 2000). Further, childhood aggression is frequently associated with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and learning difficulties (Cavell, 2000).

Why do girls engage in aggression and violence?

> Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunschot, Cunningham & Saunders, (2000) state that, Seldom is there a *unitary construct* that provides a basis for prediction or even portrayal of the association o specific variables with an outcome. the tendency in recent reviews within the criminogenic risk literature has been to view the associations with risk as being tied to a framework rather than a unitary construct (Andrews & Bonta, 1998). Quite simply, the factors that contribute to individual risk, whether it is for general antisocial risk or the threat of violence are complex including both systemic and individual variables (pp. 37-38).

Literature on the topic of girls who use aggression and violence suggests that problematic family dynamics and parental relationships, school difficulties, mental health issues and personality factors, problematic cognitive and social development, negative self-representation, atypical physiological responses, drug involvement, connections to non pro-social peers, adolescents' urge to label others, gender issues, and boredom and attention seeking may all be related to the use of aggression and violence by girls. Each of these will be examined in turn.

Family Dynamics and Parental Relationships

The influence of family on the development of aggression and violence in children has been well-documented (c.f. literature reviews on the subject by Flowers, 1990;

Whithecomb,1997; and Augimeri, Webster, Kogel & Levene ,1998; who suggest that aggression and violence in girls and boys is linked to family and social factors such as socioeconomic deprivation and poverty, harsh and inconsistent parenting, marital discord, spousal, parental and sibling violence, poor parental mental health, physical and sexual abuse and parental alcoholism, drug dependency and other substance misuse). Craig, Peters and Konarski (1998) also reported strong relationships between hostile parental interactions and inconsistent and harsh punishment practices and aggressive behavior in children.

Cavell (2000) states that parents play the strongest role in the development of aggressive behaviors among children. He suggests that social learning models adequately explain the influence of parental practices on the development of childhood aggression. Such models propose that aggressive behavior is developed and maintained through the use of negative reinforcement and escape conditioning in parent-child interactions. Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunschot, Cunningham & Saunders, 2000 having reviewed ten studies that examined the correlates of family dynamics with aggressive behavior suggest that girls' aggression at home and with peers is significantly related with mothers' and fathers' verbal and physical aggression, negative parental communication styles, parental rejection and low parental support.

Researchers who comment on the relationship between girls' aggression and girls' relationships with their parents also note that while the influence of family on children's use of aggression and violence is clearly identified in the literature, girls and boys are differentially affected (Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunschot, Cunningham & Saunders, 2000). Thus for girls, the effect of parental separation appears to be reflected in higher levels of aggression than for boys (Garnefski & Okma, 1996). As well, high verbal aggression

between parents and daughters is more positively related to aggression in girls than in boys; and a more direct relationship between the use of aggression and violence may exist for boys than for girls, in that for boys, the exposure to violence in the family seems to promote overt aggression while for girls, such exposure can lead either to overt aggression or to becoming withdrawn and depressed to a greater degree than for boys (Kruttschnitt, 1996; O'Keefe, 1994; Jouriles & Norwood, 1995; in Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunschot, Cunningham & Saunders, 2000). Bjorkqvist and Osterman (1992) noted a stronger relationship between fathers' and daughters' aggressive behavior than between fathers' and sons' aggressive behavior. Pepler and Sedighdeilami (1998) found that conflictual family interactions, especially between mothers and their daughters, can prompt and sustain aggressive behavior in girls.

Artz (1998) in her qualitative study of the life worlds and practices of violent school girls found that the families of the girls who participated in her study had multiple and serious problems including parental violence towards children, spousal and sibling violence, alcohol misuse, high verbal conflict, adult-child role confusion coupled with emotional enmeshment, along with negative and sexist views of girls and women, and victim blaming , i.e. those who were on the receiving end of violence were usually seen to have "caused" the aggression and violence aimed at them. Levene, Madsen & Pepler (in press) in their qualitative study of the prominent themes related to the development and treatment of girlhood aggression found that the parents of the girls (usually mothers, because fathers were largely absent) who participated in their study had trouble setting limits and engaged in coercive and escalating interactions that often culminated in physically punitive action on the part of mothers. Additionally, the parent child-relationships often appeared enmeshed, with unclear

boundaries about the roles of parents and children, while sibling relationships were characterized as highly conflictual.

School Difficulties

The connection between school difficulties and delinquency has been the subject of considerable research (c.f. Elliot & Voss; 1974; Voss, 1958; Elder, 1966; for earlier work). More recently, Hartnagel and Tanner (1982) examined the connection between school status and delinquency in junior and senior male and female high school students in Canadian city and found that a low commitment to school was a significant predictor of student involvement in theft and violence and school rebellion. Tanner, (1996) states, "there is little doubt that problems in school (as well as problems with parents) cause adolescents to gravitate toward peer groups, principally antisocial peer groups" (p.94). Focusing on girls, Ellickson, Saner and McGuin (1997) in the United States, and Serbin Cooperman, Peters, Lehoux, Stack and Schwartzman, (1998) in Canada, found a significant relationship between low academic achievement, dropping out of school and girls' participation in delinquency and violence. The participants in Artz (1998) all spoke extensively about their difficulties in school. Levene, Madsen, and Pepler (in press) note that, "academic difficulties were almost uniformly identified as risk factor in the lives of the girls participating in the study (p. 23)." Levene et. al, and Serbin et. al also acknowledge the connection between low school achievement and other social problems: unemployment, lack of life and labour force skills, teen pregnancy, depression, anxiety, teen mothers' difficulties with parenting and behavioral problems in the children of teen mothers.

Mental Health Issues and Personality Factors

With the onset of puberty, girls are typically three times as likely as boys to suffer depression resulting from low self-esteem, negative body image, feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and stress (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). When coupled with abuse or neglect at home, these girls become primary targets for involvement with violence. Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunschot, Cunningham and Saunders (2000) report that depressed girls are nearly four times more likely to be aggressive, and that girls who were physically or sexually victimized were at a higher risk for violence. Lescheid et. al also noted that through self reports, aggressive girls rated themselves as having "poor" mental health when compared with boys (Ellickson et. al, 1996), and that in a study of one hundred girls violent girls receiving forensic services, one in five had histories of fire-setting (Jasper, et. al, 1998). In Jasper et. al's study seven girls also reported engaging in self harm while nine girls described themselves as mentally ill.

As mentioned earlier (see *Conduct Disorder*), a strong connection between aggression and mental health issues exists. Zoccolillo et. al (1991) in their study of girls in a psychiatric hospital in the United States found that nearly 90% of aggressive girls were diagnosed as conduct disordered while 31% were diagnosed with major depression. Finally, Vanatta (1996) links suicidal ideation and suicidal behavior with aggression in female and male adolescents.

Problematic Cognitive and Social Development

Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunschot, Cunningham and Saunders (2000) in examining seven studies on cognitive variables associated with aggression in girls (Carlo, Raffaelli, Laible, & Meyer, 1999; Chase, Treboux, O'Leary, & Strassberg, 1998, Cotton, Resnick, Browne, Martin, McCarraher & Woods, 1994; Giancola, Mezzich, & Tarter, 1998; Huesman, Guerra, Zelli & Miller, 1992; Osterman, Bjorkvist, Lagerspetz, Charpentier,

Caprara, &Pastorelli, 1999; Pakaslahti & Keltigangas-Jarvinen, 1998) found that lack of empathy, the inability to take another's perspective, the belief that the use of force was justified, moral approval of aggression, attitudes supportive of aggression in family members, and low ability to handle complexity coupled with a problem solving approach that condoned violence were all associated with aggression and violence in girls.

Negative Self-representation

Perceptions of self, commonly called self-representations, are believed to be based on experiences across a variety of interpersonal relationships and are likely a constant factor across relationships, and thus, provide the possibility of a consistent determinant for behaviour. With that in mind, Moretti, Holland and McKay (2001) examined children's (52 boys, 32 girls aged 10 to 17) self-representations and their representations of how others (parents and peers) saw them and found that negative self-representations strongly predicted aggressive behaviour in both boys and girls.

For girls, but not for boys, the perception that others had negative representations of them also predicted increased aggressive behaviour. Boys who believe peers hold negative views of them tend not to engage in relational aggression, while girls who believe their peers hold negative views of them have a high propensity for engaging in relational aggression. Moretti et. al (2001) speculate that boys believe that relational aggression is a gender specific behaviour (i.e. something that girls do) and expect that "displays of relational aggression may be perceived extremely negatively by their peers and lead to greater social rejection." (p. 20). Crick and Grotpeter (1996) state that girls' relational aggression is fuelled by their tenuous social status and anxiety regarding social acceptance. They suggest that girls' beliefs about not being accepted drives them to try to control relationships in order to secure a favorable

social position. Thus, boys tend to use mostly overt aggression when they believe their peers view them negatively, but girls use both relational and overt physical aggression.

Atypical Physiological Responses

Wright, Cameron and Susman (under review), provide support for bio-psycho-social relations between gender, stress reactivity and attachment, anger and aggression. In their recent study of 60 girls and 60 boys, averaging 13.6 years of age, Wright et. al gauged hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) activity by measuring cortisol levels in the saliva of their participants as they were exposed to stress. Noting that healthy adaptation to environmental challenges typically requires HPA activation and therefore higher cortisol levels, they hypothesized that those among their participants who had healthy adaptation defined by standardized tests as secure maternal attachment, high self-efficacy for aggression inhibition and low levels on teacher's aggression reports, would have higher cortisol levels under stress than those who did not. They found that girls with low cortisol levels under stress had high trait anger, high teacher reported aggression and low maternal attachment. These three variables did not distinguish high or low cortisol levels in boys. Boys, even those who were rated by their teachers as more aggressive, reported higher maternal attachment than aggressive girls. For girls, their lack of positive attachment relations, especially with their mothers, plays a key role in their physiological response to aggression and their willingness to engage in aggression.

Of particular importance is the evidence provided by Wright, Cameron and Susman (under review) that suggests that girls and boys "may be differently affected by attachment pathways for stress responding" (p. 9). Their findings echo those of other authors noted above in the section on *family dynamics and parental relationships*, especially insofar as they

highlight the influence of the home environment and parental relationships in the development of aggressive behavior in girls.

Drug Involvement

Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunschot, Cunningham and Saunders (2000) review four studies that compare adolescent males and females on aggression and drug use (Kingery, Mirzaee, Pruitt, Hurley & Heuberger, 1991; Ellickson, Saner & MacGuigan, 1997; Jasper, Smith & Bailey, 1998; Anderson, 1994). Together, their findings suggest that violent girls are most likely to be high risk-takers, to have engaged in long-term drug use, or become involved in fighting, drinking and stealing through their association with a gang.

In a report that assesses the health of learning environments in public schools, the B.C. Auditor General (2000) acknowledges the relationship between alcohol and drugs abuse and the aggressive behaviour of adolescent girls (and boys). Citing a Health Canada report, this review of the learning environment in B.C. public schools states that students who use marijuana are also more likely to skip classes and engage in bullying behaviours.

Corrado, Odgers and Cohen (2000) recently studied girls in custody and included reference to girls' drug use in their descriptions of girls' "multi-problem profiles" (p. 12). The average age of onset of drug use for the girls in their study was 12 years of age. However, they point out that virtually all the girls had histories that also included severe family dysfunction and physical or sexual abuse, attesting to the interplay between systemic and individual variables in supporting or sustaining girls' delinquent behaviour, including aggression. Finally, like Corrado, Odgers and Cohen (2000), Wright, Cameron and Susman (under review) studied young females offenders and found evidence to suggest that girls' participation in persistent violence is associated with *chronic* drug use.

Connections to Non-Pro-social Peers

As Tanner (1996) points out,

> What makes adolescent deviance both distinctive and disturbing is its collective appearance. When adolescents behave badly, they often do so in public and in the company of others.

In Canada, murders involving groups of young people in killing others, sometimes peers and sometimes older people, have made headlines and been the discussion of extensive journalistic investigations (c.f. Chisholm, December 8, 1997). Artz, Blais and Nicholson (2000) found that girls are often influenced by their peers to engage in their first acts of delinquent behaviour.

Girls, unlike boys, often gain little popularity when they select peer groups that behave in aggressive or violent ways. Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunschot, Cunningham and Saunders (2000) recap the work of several researchers/authors who note that girls are likely to be rejected when they express physical or relational aggression towards others (Crick, 1996; Messer & Gross, 1994; Rhys & Baer, 1998). But even boys have few illusions about delinquent subcultures that involve violence. As one participant in Webber's (1991) study on the street kids, stated, "friends are just dudes…who haven't hurt you yet" (p.14).

In her book on the lives of girls in gangs, Sikes (1997) notes that for some girls, conjuring up fear in others is the closest thing to feeling respected that they have ever experienced. Artz (1998) found that girls who use violence, along with boys who use violence and girls and boys who do not use violence, rank friends as their number one source of enjoyment; but she also found that for these girls, friendships were not premised on bonds of affection so much as they were grounded in alliances of power. Each of Artz 's (1998) key

informants described a "best friend" with whom they had frequent altercations that on occasion included beating up that friend or even luring her to a spot where she would be beaten by others in order to teach her a lesson usually about staying away from someone else's boyfriend. These girls had difficulty with stable friendships and often characterized themselves and their friends as "losers," and if they found themselves in competition for male attention as "bitches" and "sluts."

Adolescents' Urge to Label

Tanenbaum (1999) explains the verbal aggression often used by teenage girls as being prompted by adolescents' urge to label everybody given that psychosocial development during the period of adolescence focuses on the development of identity. Adolescent girls struggle to determine who they are and part of that process involves making decisions about who others are. Tanenbaum (1999) suggests that when girls are confronted with someone who doesn't fit their idea of how girls "should" act or look, they grasp for an insulting label and commonly employ sexualized labels. Naomi Wolf, (1997) in her book, *Promiscuities: the secret struggle for womanhood*, provides a thorough analysis of the culturally embedded and endorsed ways in which girls and women are systematically devalued and objectified. Meda Chesney-Lind, in her work with Randall Shelden (1992; 1998) also discusses the cultural embeddedness of the sexual objectification of girls, especially delinquent girls, and shows how preoccupied the American Justice system is with controlling female sexuality.

Girls are of course, not the only ones to use insulting labels to describe and control girls. Artz (1998; 2000; in press) found that the key informants in her studies were frequently subjected to derogatory and demeaning sexual labeling by girls, by boys and on occasion by adults. The label "slut" is often used to single out a girl who is viewed as deserving of

aggression. The key informants in Artz (1998) noted that in most, but not all cases, they beat up other girls primarily because they saw these girls as "sluts" who threatened their relationships with males. These key informants felt justified in attacking "sluts" and saw them as deserving of being beaten because they were sexually provocative or promiscuous. They also felt justified and honor bound in attacking those who attempted to attach this label to them.

Creighton and Farr (1999), in their report, *Sexpectations: Youth perceptions on the causes of sexual assault, Report 2 – Target audience research, Project Respect*, in interviewing 133 non-high risk youth (75 female and 58 males) in the same area in which Artz conducted her studies also found clear indications that indeed,

> The link between being labeled a slut and being targeted for sexualized violence is clearly demonstrated by some youth's beliefs. That is, some teens feel that guys are sexually "entitled" to certain girls and that these girls (labeled as sluts) have lost the right to say "no" or that they don't mean "no." The teens agreed that nobody deserves to be sexually assaulted, however many stated that sluts are "asking for it" (p.4).

Gender Issues

The fact that the insults that girls and boys direct towards girls often involve sexuality reflects their perspective on the place of females within our culture. In their research in schools, Sadker and Sadker (1994) found that girls generally had a higher awareness of forms of gender discrimination and how gender "works" in society. When girls "buy in" to being inferior and needing to maintain "their place" in deference to males, they often enact these beliefs in their aggression towards other girls, especially those that they perceive to be breaking gender "rules." Artz (1998; 2000) notes that violent girls espouse beliefs that are

similar to those that support male to female violence – patriarchal rights to control and dominate females. These girls tend to attack other girls in order to maintain alliances of power that enable them to attract male attention (Artz, 2000). Inequality has a role in perpetuating their violent behaviour – when they internalize societal messages that demean girls they turn their feelings of self-hatred onto other girls to control each other in ways that attract the attention of the dominant group: males. Thus, violent girls' social interaction involves a constant battle for dominance.

Bennett, Addams and Fineran (1997) agree that girls who endorse male dominance are more likely to use violence in their own lives. Further, they suggest that when girls use violence, they perpetuate the strength of belief in male role dominance. Additional support for the ways in which gender socialization prompts the sexual insults that girls level at one another comes from the Feminist Research, Education, Development and Action Centre (1998). They reiterate that attitudes maintaining that a woman's body and sexuality are her only assets serve to perpetuate various forms of abuse.

Girls are at higher risk for being victimized either physically or sexually by relatives or strangers and when they have had early experiences with violence, they are also more likely to continue having experiences with violence through selecting poor partners. Young women are more likely than young men to select anti-social partners (Lescheid, et al, 2000).

Alleviating Boredom and Attention-seeking

Owens (1997) offers some reasons that girls provide for relational bullying. These include: alleviating boredom through creating excitement to find out gossip, seeking attention/importance and seeking validation through belonging to a group that excludes others. Ashford (2000), in her conceptual analysis of boredom, notes that while boredom in

youth is often seen as transient and innocuous, can be "a serious, non-trivial problem that is currently neglected as a cause of anti-social behavior including violence" (p. 55).

Who is the "Violent Girl?"

Myths abound regarding the factors that prompt girls to act physically aggressive. The reality of what drives aggressive behavior in girls is discernable when we examine violent girls' experiences and beliefs. Artz (1998) provides some insights that are outlined below. These help us to develop a profile for violent girls.

Violent girls are more likely than non-violent girls and both violent and non-violent boys to have been:

- Attacked while going to or from school
- Physically abused at home
- Sexually abused
- Talked into sex against their will
- Involved in rule breaking and other deviant and delinquent behaviors besides physical aggression

Pepler and Sedighdeilami (1998) agree that the problems of aggressive girls often include experiences with being victimized by others. Further, in their relationships with adults, violent girls have often learned that relationships involve one person holding "power over" another.

Table I[3] below outlines common myths and realities surrounding the aggressive behavior of girls.

Table I: Myths and Realities About Violent Girls

[3] This table is based on information contained in various sources that include discussion of fact and fiction surrounding the issue of girls'

Myth	Reality
▪ Don't care about others	▪ Abide by rules of caring for in-group (can do what you want to those outside the group)
▪ Think that beating up people is fun	▪ Attribute responsibility for own behavior to others
▪ Are trying to show that females are equal to males	▪ Have a low sense of valuing females/believe that females don't have power and are inferior to males - power can be achieved only by attracting dominant males
	▪ Are more likely to seek validation through men than compete with them
▪ Are an outcome of women's liberation	▪ Often have experienced coercive parenting, severe punishment and abuse
▪ Have never been adequately disciplined	
▪ Get high on being involved in dangerous activities	▪ Often act out aggressively to secure social dominance or to avoid being controlled or victimized by others.

The problems of aggressive and violent girls are multidimensional in scope. In addition to experiencing problems with aggressive behaviors, aggressive girls often experience problems in many other areas of their lives, including emotional problems, self-concept problems, social skill deficiencies, and poor academic performance (Pepler & Sedigheilami, 1998). In summary, the evidence detailed above illuminates the problems associated with girlhood aggression and points to the need to take such aggression seriously. Various researchers point to the importance of early intervention. For example, Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunschot, Cunningham and Saunders (2000) state that targeting girls' use

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aggressive behaviour (Artz, 1998; Artz, Blais & Nicholson, 2000; Chesney-

of indirect, non-physical forms of violence may prevent direct physical forms of violence. Craig, Peters and Konarski (1998, p. 21) extend the argument for early intervention, stating that it also serves to prevent the development of additional problems such as "school drop out, criminality, unemployment, depression, anxiety, and generalized levels of reduced attainment and competence" later in life. Further, Connolly, Pepler, Craig and Taradash (2000) note that adolescents whose peer relationships are characterized by bullying are at risk in their development of healthy romantic relationships. They found that girl bullies, like boy bullies, are more likely to use of aggression to assert dominance and power in their romantic relationships. Further, they are also more likely than non-bullies to be the victims of romantic aggression.

What can be done?

Girls at risk of becoming aggressive are assisted in avoiding aggressive behavior by enhancing protective factors that exist within themselves and within their families, schools and neighborhoods (Maier, 1990; Artz, 1998). Resilience in childhood can be strengthened by ensuring that some protective factors exist at various levels within a child's world (Fraser, 1997). At the individual level, high intelligence coupled with solid self-esteem and feelings of self-efficacy and competence in normative roles are important. Within the family, school and neighbourhood contexts, social support, the presence of at least one caring and supportive adult, positive relationships with parents – especially mothers, and effective (non-authoritarian) parenting support girls to use assertive behavior rather than aggressive behavior. At the broad environmental level, having many opportunities for education, achievement, growth and employment will enable girls to have the power to thrive within their worlds.

Lipd, 1999; Pate, 1997).

Programs that focus solely on "anger management" tend to neglect the meaning-making process used to rationalize the use of aggression and violence and ignore the practical and effective uses of violence. Given Moretti, Holland and McKay's (2001) conclusion that self-representation is an important determinant of aggressive behaviour, that likely involves a complex interplay between both affective and cognitive factors, effective interventions must facilitate the development of a well integrated self-other representation through challenging negative beliefs and increasing girls' opportunities for positive social experiences. therefore as they point out, interventions that ignore meaning making cannot come close to addressing girls' negative perceptions of self that contribute so clearly to their aggressive behaviour.

In their report *Violence Prevention and The Girl Child*, the Alliance of Five Research Centres (1999) state that prevention programs should involve young people and use tools that reach them and that program content should focus on the socialization of children and the promotion of non-violent values. Below we outline specific suggestions for working with girls, working with boys, working with parents, and working with schools and communities. Previous work on program development and implementation suggests that girls and boys respond differently to violence prevention programming (Artz & Riecken, 1994; Cameron & Team, 2000).

Working with Girls

A problem exists in identifying girls who are aggressive towards others, especially when they engage in indirect forms of aggression that are not easily observed by outsiders. This problem in identifying girls in need of help (as aggressors or victims) is compounded by the fact that girls that are being bullied are more likely to feel sad or miserable than to feel angry and more likely to tell their friends than a teacher or another adult (Jones, 1998).

Pepler and Sedighdeilami (1998) also found that that the problems of aggressive girls are not likely to come to the attention of parents, teachers, or even the girls themselves, and thus, may result in few referrals for support. Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunschot, Cunningham and Saunders (2000) suggest that looking for verbal aggression and intimidation among pre-adolescent girls may be a helpful way of identifying those who run the risk of developing into physically violent adolescents. However, assistance in identifying at-risk girls should be available soon. After years of researching and providing educational and support resources on aggressive behavior and criminal offending among Canadian boys, the Earlscourt Child and Family Centre in Toronto, Ontario is developing an assessment tool for predicting antisocial behavior in girls under 12 years of age (Earlscourt, 2000).

Levene, Madsen and Pepler (in press) state that the very early difficulties experienced by aggressive girls, beginning in infancy and toddlerhood, "suggests a window of opportunity for the introduction of preventative steps to address the risk factors" (p. 23). Again, like Tremblay (2000), these authors contend that the importance of starting young can't be stressed enough.

While the literature on violence prevention suggests that prevention programs should focus on all children (The Alliance of Five Research Centres on Violence, 1999) – girls **and** boys – girls and boys have been reported to respond differently to violence prevention initiatives (Artz, Riecken, MacIntyre, Lam & Maczewski, 1999). Special attention should be paid to the following when working with girls:

- Attend to girls' identity formation and sources of intrinsic and extrinsic self-evaluation heading into adolescence

- Provide early intervention for girls who have witnessed or experienced violence that focuses on strengthening and valuing the roles of women
- Instill a sense of "mattering", i.e. an experience-based sense of being valued and belonging that is not premised on sexual currency
- Help victims deal with depression (depressed youth often become victimizers)

Working with Boys

Engaging boys in discussions about the existence of sexism in their schools, communities and the media can help boys to be aware in ways in which girls (and boys) are treated unfairly because of gender expectations (Sadker and Sadker, 1994). In his book, Real Boys, William Pollack (1998) stresses the importance of teaching boys that there are many ways to be masculine. Similarly, teaching boys about the diversity of femininity will help them to avoid perpetuating narrow, restricting views of what girls can do and be.

Working with Parents

Cavell (2000) has documented the use of a relationship-based model of socialization for working with parents of aggressive children. He emphasizes that aggressive girls are unlikely to benefit from interventions unless they include long-term involvement of a socializing relationship with at least one adult who provides them with a sense of acceptance, containment of coercive behavior and prosocial values. However, in order for practitioners to support families, policies and funding practices must be in place. He stresses that society should not give up too quickly on working with the parents of aggressive children and that through sensitive and informed practitioners, these parents can find the therapeutic mentors they need as much as their children need mentors. Finally, he notes that in addition to working with families of aggressive children, the broader social, political and economic

issues that influence childhood aggression need to be addressed. The Earlscourt Child and Family Centre (Levene, 1999) concurs with Cavell (2000) and stresses the importance of promoting parenting skills to facilitate the raising of prosocial children. The centre produces a variety of parent education resources in addition to offering prevention and intervention programs for girls and their families (Levene, 1999). Wright, Cameron and Susman (under review) stress that parents require systematic support in order to work towards addressing their children's aggressive or violent behaviour.

Working with Schools and Communities

Again, the evidence points to the need to start young (Hertzman, 2000; McCord & Tremblay, 1992; Olafsdottir, 1996). The likelihood of reversing aggressive patterns of behavior diminishes over time (Cavell, 2000). Early involvement in proactive prosocial programs in elementary schools have proven positive effects (Artz & Riecken, 1994). Results from several school-based violence prevention programs in B.C. indicate that girls' aggressive behavior is amenable to reshaping. For example, between 1993 and 1998, girls' self-reported rate of participation in physical fights dropped by 50% while boys' self-reported rate of participation dropped by only 22% (Artz, Riecken, MacIntyre, Lam & Maczewski, 1999). Further, girls reported that they were significantly:

- Less involved in watching and encouraging fights
- More willing to walk away from the possibility of a fight
- More willing to accept that bullying victims should be reported to adult authority figures
- More concerned about and supportive of interpersonal social values such as politeness, generosity, forgiveness, concern, and respect for others.

Levene, Madsen and Pepler (in press) indicate that public awareness of attention deficit disorder (ADD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) among girls needs to be increased. Often, these disorders are considered to primarily effect boys, and girls suffering inattention in schools are commonly left without help. Early identification of girls with ADD or ADHD could help schools, health workers and families to respond more appropriately to meet the needs of these at-risk girls.

A good example of the varied possibilities for shaping school-based programs is offered by Ann Cameron's work with schools in New Brunswick (Cameron & Team, 2000). Each of the three participating schools documented in her report *Girls and Boys: Apart ... and Together* chose different and varied means to develop a violence prevention program that met the needs and interests of their members.

Similarly, in British Columbia, Artz, Riecken, MacIntyre, Lam & Maczewski (1999) worked with sixteen schools that developed individual programs that ranged widely in scope and focus. Their work included ongoing evaluation as part of program implementation and enabled them to summarize the characteristics of successful school- and community-based programs. Successful programs tend to be community-driven and adopt a holistic, ecological approach that incorporates the following:

- Parent involvement
- Collaboration with students, community-based agencies and community members
- Focus on social skills training to reach girls' desire to build positive relationships
- Exposure of implicit values in media around gender and violence
- Provision of positive adult guidance

- Teach alternative approaches to solving disputes and settling conflicts other than the use of threats, intimidation and violence
- Emphasis on the value of women as individuals in their own right
- Avoidance of the assumption that violence against females is perpetrated only by males
- Work towards eliminating sexism and gender inequities through deconstructing gender stereotypes
- Include an abuse-survivor recovery component that address the female experience in positive and strength-giving ways
- Monitor and evaluate the implementation of programs to determine continued focus on purpose and achievement of goals.

Finally, Cameron and Team (2000) offer some additional suggestions for the development and implementation of prevention and intervention programs:

- Engage young people in constructing definitions of the personal meaning of violence based on their own experiences
- Pay attention to differences in the experiences of and tolerance for violence in the lives of boys and girls
- Attend to differences in preferences that boys and girls may have for participation (safe places to talk versus action-oriented formats)
- Demand action – forum organizers need to seek allies in their communities who can support youth in moving to a safer, more satisfying place in terms of personal and social responses to issue of violence
- Address gender differences in tolerance for male-male aggression and female relational aggression, and related outcomes and implications

- Provide varied opportunities for expression (music, art, video, debates, etc) to engage as many youth as possible
- Help youth learn about how to develop healthy relationships in the absence of positive role models in society, the media and even at home through focusing on communication, healthy sexuality and recreational opportunities.

Conclusion

There are four key points that this literature review highlights. The first is that there is most often no one factor that contributes to girls' (or for that matter boys') aggressive and violent behaviour. This suggests strong avoidance of "one-size fits all" approaches to prevention and intervention. The second is that aggression encompasses not only behaviours that involve physical force, but also behaviours that involve harming relationships (rumour spreading, ostracism, telling secrets, etc.). Thus for girls especially, failing to address indirect and relational aggression can mean denial of girls' participation in violence. The third point is that in considering girls' aggression including indirect and relational aggression, we must consider gender issues that underpin girls use of violence in all its forms. Girls' use of aggression and violence is often in pursuit of male attention , acceptance and approbation. This suggests a need to pay careful attention to gender relations whenever theories about girls and aggression are formulated. The fourth point is that our understanding of girls' use of aggression and violence is better developed than it was some years ago, but the link between our current knowledge and prevention and intervention aimed at girls is still being developed. While some headway has been made in very recent years, much more work is needed before we can say that we are adequately responding to the needs of aggressive girls. The knowledge base seems to be growing and has recently benefited from work by many researchers and workers in the field. We must continue to support the translation of the knowledge into well-evaluated prevention and intervention programs.

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